

NEW PAPER ON OUR CHRISTIAN TEACHING RESOURCES WEBSITE <http://www.christianteaching.org.uk/>

“DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BRITISH CHRISTIANS”

A growing number of British Christians say that believers in this country are being persecuted. They refer to the various successful court cases which, they claim, discriminate against Christians. Are British Christians being persecuted or is this a case of paranoia, or, as one secular website put it, “Christian cry-babies”? This paper seeks to obtain all the relevant evidence on the recent cases, including reading any court judgments, and to give due weight to the arguments used by judges and employers. *(For updates on this issue, see the blog site).*

[Apologies that some of you were told of this paper before its inclusion on the site was delayed]

DANGERS FACING ISRAEL

It is very sad that nothing appears to be happening on the peace front in the Holy Land. It is not only sad, it is dangerous, particularly to Israel.

The threat from Iran

The threat from Iran continues. Israelis disagree as to whether Iran will develop nuclear weapons but the fear that they will dominate. Yuval Diskin, former head of the Shin Bet (Secret Service) has said that the government is exaggerating the potential effectiveness of an Israeli attack on Iran. He added that an attack would accelerate Iran’s nuclear programme. He warned that it would ignite a regional war and said such an attack was “the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard.” To say the least, it was not helpful that US presidential Republican candidate Mitt Romney, for personal political reasons, was at pains to promise “respect” for an Israeli decision to attack.

In May, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia warned the US that if Iran developed nuclear weapons, the Saudis would seek to do so as well.

A meeting between Iran, Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany in June was a failure and this played into the hands of the Israeli hawks. Iran also warned that they would attack US bases in the Gulf if Israel attacked. They also threatened to close the vital Straits of Hormuz in response to oil sanctions. The latest intelligence indicates that Iran has made greater progress on developing components for its nuclear weapons program than the West had previously realized.

The threat of a third intifada

The stalling of the peace process and Israel’s defiant expansion of West Bank settlements could easily spark off another violent popular uprising by the Palestinians. In late June, after four months of quiet, Hamas launched many rockets from Gaza into Israel. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said the group was capable of striking any target in Israel. “Today we are not only able to hit Tel Aviv as a city but, God willing, we are able to hit specific targets in Tel Aviv and anywhere in occupied Palestine,” he said.

In May Israel’s High Court justices criticized the government for not fulfilling its legal commitment to demolish illegal buildings in the Ulpana neighborhood, part of the West Bank settlement of Beit El. The government discussed the possibility of circumventing the High Court decision. Under pressure from the government, the high court twice delayed the evacuation of the Migron outpost illegally built on private Palestinian land. Now it is due on August 21st.

There was an attempt to pass a bill, supported by a number of ministers in the Knesset to legalize settlements built on Palestinian land if 20 Israeli families had lived there for at least four years. This is despite the fact that the Knesset does not have the authority to legislate laws for the territories, which are not under Israeli sovereignty. Netanyahu opposed the bill and it was defeated.

Netanyahu said in June: “Our policy is to bolster the settlements, while adhering to the law.” He added “for every home we evacuate we’ll build 10 new homes.”

The UN is planning to send a panel from the UN Human Rights Council “to investigate the implications of the Israeli settlements on the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of the Palestinian people throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.” Israel responded by a boycott of the Council.

In July, A committee created by Prime Minister Netanyahu and headed by former Supreme Court justice Edmond Levy, proposed that the government sanctions all West Bank settlements and rejected the claim that Israel's presence in the territory is that of an occupying force. It stated that Jewish settlements are legal, because Jordan did not have sovereignty over the West Bank when it was occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War. That argument was rejected in a landmark 2004 non-binding ruling by the International Court of Justice. The committee also said that West Bank is “disputed” territory and the establishment of the settlements does not violate the Fourth Geneva Convention because it does not involve the forced transfer of a civilian population into occupied territory.

However Israel accepted at Camp David the legitimate rights of inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza. In the Oslo Accords, Israel conveyed either full or civilian control of about 40 percent of the territory in the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority. The Sharon government accepted that it should suspend all construction in the settlements and vacate all the outposts established after March 2001. But only three of the 26 settlements Sharon agreed to demolish in 2003 have been removed. Israel has resumed construction work on one of the outposts.

There are now 350,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, 15,500 more than a year ago.

The US State Department responded: “We do not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlement activity and we oppose any effort to legalize settlement outposts.” Prof. David Kretzmer, an international law specialist commented: “If Israel is not an occupying force, it must immediately relinquish ownership of all private lands seized over the years for military use, taken with authority as the occupying force in an occupied territory, and restore the lands to previous owners.” However, without waiting for a cabinet decision the Israel Defence Force issued orders applying immigration law to the whole of the Palestinian territories. Shortly afterwards Israel decided it needed to remove five Palestinian settlements, some of them dating from the 19th century, in order to provide land for military training.

The Israel actions in bolstering the settlements is, of course, contrary to agreement made in the peace process and Middle East experts warned the prime minister that it could provoke a third violent intifada.

On the Peace Process the Palestinians are demanding a state based on the pre-1967 borders (with minor land swaps) and a freeze on the settlements. Yuval Diskin denied that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is the one refusing to negotiate and added: “We’re not talking with the Palestinians because this government has no interest in talking with the Palestinians ... I know from up close what is going on in that area.”

Another factor is that the 2012 Amnesty International report says that Israel frequently uses excessive force against the Palestinians. It records that this year Israel has killed 55 civilians in the West Bank and Gaza, including 11 children. (However, the same report criticised both the PA and Hamas for arbitrary arrest, mistreating detainees and restricting freedom of expression).

The threat of extreme new regimes in the Middle East

Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak said recently: “What initially seemed like an Arab Spring is turning out to be an Islamic winter. Hostility toward Israel is serving as a basis for garnering political favour.”

Clearly the Syrian situation is a grave worry to Israel, especially when the Syrian President dropped hints about using chemical weapons only on those who attack Syria from the outside. It is difficult to assess how other new Middle East regimes will develop and what this will mean for Israel. The danger is of extremist Islamic governments coming to power.

However Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi wrote to President Shimon Perez of Israel: “I am looking forward to exerting our best efforts to get the Middle East peace process back to its right track in order to achieve security and stability for all peoples of the region, including the Israeli people.” Morsi and his aides have stressed to U.S. and European officials that they intend to respect all international treaties which Egypt has signed, including the peace treaty with Israel. Also security coordination between Israel and Egypt is currently perhaps at the highest level ever.

The threat of serious loss of support in the western world

Matthew Gould is the first Jewish British Ambassador to Israel. In an interview shortly after his appointment in 2010

he said that being Jewish gave him “a visceral understanding of why Israel is so fixated on its own security and why security and peace mean so much to Israel and why it’s a country which feels so keenly that it lives on the knife edge.” This is an important quotation for those concerned about justice and peace for both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

On August 2nd this year he gave another interview to Israel’s Channel 10 news in which he warned:

“The positive image that Israel is trying to reflect to the world is deteriorating in the light of the violent practices it carries out against Palestinian citizens in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

“Israelis might wake up in 10 years time and find out that suddenly the international community has changed, and that patience for continuing the status quo has reduced. Support for Israel is starting to erode and that's not about these people on the fringe who are shouting loudly and calling for boycotts and all the rest of it. The interesting category are those members of parliament in the middle, and in that group I see a shift.

“..... The centre ground, the majority, the British public may not be expert but they are not stupid and they see a stream of announcement about new building in settlements, they read stories about what's going on in the West Bank, they read about restrictions in Gaza. The substance of what's going wrong is really what's driving this.”

“Anyone who cares about Israel's standing in the world should be concerned about the erosion of popular support.”

The threat of waning US influence in the Middle East

Richard Hass, former director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department, said recently

“The issues of Iran and Arab upheavals will dominate the Middle East agenda, and the peace process with Israel will be a less dominant aspect of U.S. Middle East policy The American era of dominating the Middle East peace process is ending. More responsibility will fall on the shoulders of Israelis and Palestinians themselves.”

Fawaz A. Gerges, professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Middle East expert, agrees that the United States is losing influence in the Middle East. This is due to the invasion of Iraq, ongoing alliances with autocrats, and the Arab Spring uprisings that Washington failed to foresee and properly capitalize upon.

Since the US is Israel’s main ally and vital supporter, this is bad news for her – and for the peace process.

It may also be significant that Dr. Mendelsson, Director of Israel Studies and Lecturer in Modern Jewish History at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem has written recently about the Jewish leadership in the US: “Young Jewish leaders are shifting away from a Jewish identity focused on Israel, peoplehood and community toward Jewishness as a personal spiritual journey, disconnected from the collective, unaware of the centrality of the land of Israel to Jewish history.” The the implications for Israel are profoundly troubling.

CHALLENGES FACING THE PALESTINIANS

Marginalisation

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said in July that the Palestinians have never been more marginalized. The world focus is on the Arab Spring, the Eurozone crisis and the American elections.

Israeli negativism towards the peace process

Israel is currently not serious about the peace process and is benefiting from the world attention being elsewhere. The Israel expansion of settlements on the West Bank is a cause of on-going distress to the Palestinians. And now there is the demolition of the five Palestinian villages to make room for Israeli military training.

Israeli military incursions

There are nightly incursions by the IDF into Palestinian cities which, according to the Oslo Accords are under Palestinian control. Then there is the excessive force used by the IDF, as recorded in the Amnesty report.

Settler extremism

There have been numerous examples of attacks by Israeli settlers on innocent Palestinians and their property. Fayyad said that attacks on Palestinians and their property, farmland and mosques had increased by 150 percent over the last year.

Acute financial crisis

Fayyad has made great efforts in financial management, but the Palestinian Authority was still unable to pay employees' salaries in full in June. The Palestinian Authority said at the start of the year that it has \$1.5 billion in debt to banks and companies and was expecting a \$1 billion shortfall in its \$3.5 billion annual budget. The UN called for international donations to help the PA through a critical cash shortage.

Potential loss of confidence by Palestinians in their leadership

Fayyad said: "When you cease to become a source of credible and convincing answers to your people... that is really a danger zone. I don't have to speculate whether we will have an intifada today or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Even without that happening I believe we are on a path of growing political untenability."

The Palestinians are still seeking a Vatican-style "non-member state" status in the UN General Assembly but the Israelis are working hard to frustrate this.

PRAYER TOPICS

1. Pray for an early resumption of peace talks and for a determination to reach peace with justice in practice.
2. Pray for an end to violence by extreme settlers and excessive military violence and that there will not be a third Intifada.
3. Pray for Israel to be willing to freeze the settlements and to avoid marginalisation of Palestinians
4. Pray for peace and justice in all the countries affected by the "Arab Spring" including Syria.
5. Pray for adequate finances for the Palestinians and wise financial management.
6. Pray for sanctions rather than military attack to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power

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